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NATO Expansion The Path to European Security?

An alliance defines a common purpose in the face of specific contingencies. A system of collective security organizes nations that undertake to protect themselves, against each other if necessary . . . An aggression against NATO faces a clearly established dividing line, prepositioned forces, an elaborate command and control system and an agreed strategy. None of these conditions exists in a system of collective security . . . This is why such systems have invariably aborted, either in disagreement over the nature of the threat or over how to deal with it.'

Henry Kissinger

On January 12, 1994, President Clinton committed the United States to NATO's eastward expansion, telling Central Europe's leaders that it was not a question of "*whether* NATO will take on new members but *when* and *how*"² Mr Clinton's statement begged the question "*Why?*" While he had acknowledged only the week before that there was "not a consensus" within NATO for expansion, his determination to expand alliance membership was clear.³

The President's declaration came hard on the heels of NATO's approval of Clinton's own "Partnership for Peace" (PfP) initiative, which extended NATO security cooperation to other nations while effectively postponing the question of actual membership expansion. In less than a year, however, the U.S. would seemingly abandon this deliberate approach by pressing for progress on the membership process.

In December 1994, virtually at the moment that Russia was to formalize its participation in the PfP, the U.S. pressured the alliance into undertaking a short-term study on NATO membership requirements. Widely perceived as accelerating the alliance's eastward expansion, the American

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proposal precipitated a diplomatic crisis and brought U.S. and NATO relations with Russia to a post-Cold War low.⁴

While the vigorous Russian objections prompted NATO solidarity on the issue of expansion, our allies too were uneasy about apparent American haste. Responding to President Yeltsin's warnings of renewed polarity and a "cold peace," NATO leaders talked in conciliatory tones. Chancellor Kohl promised there would be "intensive partnership" with Russia and Ukraine accompanying any NATO expansion, and Prime Minister John Major stressed that the study would examine the "*how* and *why*, not the *who* and *when*" of the issue.⁵ [Emphasis added]

If, as Mr Major has said, the question of "*why*?" remains open in Europe, it probably deserves renewed examination in the United States as well. The issue of expansion had, of course, been previously debated and the Administration's position was a product of that discourse. But, the focus of past discussions was on "*Why expand?*" instead of "*Why expand NATO?*"

The European security debate in America has consistently been framed within the context of NATO. The U.S. discussion of the *who*, *when*, *where*, *how*, and *why* of expansion have always assumed that the *what* was NATO. Examining the European security situation without such a bias yields a different solution. While NATO remains the central element in European security, its expansion does not necessarily advance that security: a NATO-championed PfP offers greater potential for success.

This analysis of the European security issue has two parts: what is the security requirement? (e.g., why expand?) and, what organization(s) can satisfy that requirement? (e.g., why expand NATO?) The latter question can then be further divided to address whether NATO is suited to meet the requirement and, if not, what are the alternatives?

THE SECURITY REQUIREMENT

The end of the Cold War has redefined the security situation for the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. Rather than ushering in a period of harmony and peace, the collapse of the Soviet empire has brought new stress and uncertainty. Old security coalitions are gone and the comforting stability of the Cold War's bipolarity has disappeared. Economic and political turmoil and reawakened nationalist rivalries have created an unstable environment in which these newly emergent democracies are desperately seeking security guarantees.

In this environment, these nations have turned to the West. They (and their Western advocates) cite three principal arguments for incorporating them into Western security arrangements: (1) to counter the potential threat of a resurgent, non-democratic Russia; (2) to stabilize the region, precluding violence and its likely repercussions; and, (3) to further the integration of these states with the West and reinforce their internal reforms.

Resurgent Russia

The fear of a Russian "threat" is more than simply a holdover suspicion from the Cold War. To be sure, there is still some mistrust and a degree of sentiment in favor of consolidating the West's Cold War victory to secure our "gains," but other concerns exist. Russia is, after all, the largest and most powerful country on the continent and it, like its neighbors, is going through intense turmoil. The potential failure of Russia's democratic conversion frightens the former Soviet clients. Czech President Vaclav Havel warns that the alternative to Russian democracy will be a pseudo-authoritarian state confronting NATO.⁶

The failure of Russian democracy is entirely possible. Indeed, Zbigniew Brzezinski sees democratic failure as likely and cautions against allowing an Eastern European security vacuum to

develop which might tempt Russian imperialists.⁷ William Safire cites Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger for his conclusion that "Russia is authoritarian at heart and expansionist by habit," and he recommends that we move East while they are weak.⁸

The Russians, of course, object, asking credit for their significant internal progress and for their contributions to the changes in the rest of Europe.⁹ Russia does have an acknowledged interest in ensuring that its neighbors do not become a threat and also in avoiding becoming isolated from the rest of Europe - legitimate concerns that exist independent of any imagined territorial designs.¹⁰

Against these arguments, however, critics cite the Yeltsin government's own warnings about the Russian right. Furthermore, the Russian political and military activities in the Caucasus and Central Asia, combined with the increasingly vocal Russian opposition to proposed NATO expansion, have strongly reinforced fears of Russia's hegemonistic tendencies and intentions.¹¹ Outside assistance would be vital for the new democracies to be able to resist intimidation and pressure and to avoid being drawn into a Russian sphere of influence. And, their small armed forces are clearly inadequate to meet a Russian threat, even if acting in concert.

Regional Instability

The natural bi-product of revolution, even peaceful revolution, is turmoil. The collapse of the Soviet empire brought with it the end of Soviet-imposed social, political, economic and international security order for all of the states of Central and Eastern Europe. The resulting convulsions in turn have complicated the political and economic transformation of these countries.

The interdependent post-communist goals of democracy, prosperity and peace are threatened by both internal disorder and potential interstate conflict. Insecurity arising from these

threats imperils the transition process, and the ramifications of failure might not be confined to the region.¹²

The uncertain and painful process of creating democracies and market economies where there is no tradition of either is fraught with danger of disaffection and reactionary dissent. The internal threats to stability and orderly democratic and market reform include popular political disillusionment, bureaucratic intransigence, economic frustration, military dislocation and ethnic chauvinism.¹³ These factors reinforce both an individual and a collective sense of vulnerability in the widespread uncertainty of the continuing turbulence. A reliable assurance of security could promote confidence and therefore enhance stability by reducing anxiety.

In a region where instability is characterized by the Administration as "incipient,"¹⁴ the risk of interstate confrontation is real. Conflicts and deep-seated animosities characterize the histories of these nations and their peoples. Bilateral security concerns, mostly latent in the current scramble of national redefinition, could be quickly aroused with little provocation.

The internal destabilizing variables cited previously have the potential to paralyze the new democratic governments, creating circumstances where authoritarian order and discipline could become welcome. In such an environment, populist leaders could seize upon nationalist themes, vilifying "enemies" in order to gain power. The rekindling of long suppressed animosities, with renewed irredentist claims or xenophobic fears, raises the potential for armed conflict in the region, conflict that could widen.¹⁵

Arguments that the region is inherently unstable with limited prospects for improvement and that it is of only peripheral U.S. national interest are countered by the contention that European-wide security is at stake.¹⁶ Not only could Western economic interests be adversely

affected by events there, but political stability could be threatened by migration or a flood of economic, political or combat refugees. Also there is the danger that Western nations, particularly frontline Germany, could be drawn into a quarrel.¹⁷ Security guarantees could promote stability and mitigate the risk of future crises.

Western Integration

The success of Europe's new democracies depends upon their integration into the existing Western political, economic and security community. The path to that integration is through membership in Western organizations. Such membership legitimizes government programs and demonstrates progress toward critical national goals to the electorates of these new states. These ties also offer security and realistic hope for continued stable progress. From the beginning of their new independence, all of the former communist states have been urgently seeking integration with the West through organizational membership.¹⁸

There are reasons for the Central and Eastern European nations to fear that their Western integration could be a lengthy or even interminable process. The European Union has already demonstrated recurring difficulty in achieving internal agreement and its members have shown a reluctance to compromise self interests.¹⁹ Similarly, Western security organizations have been generally circumspect regarding expansion. The complexity of the integration process increases as the rules are changed as they were on March 2, 1995, when the European Commission chief predicated EU membership on resolution of the security issue.²⁰

Membership in the Western community is the key to success for these fledgling democracies. If the West fails to welcome the post-communist states or if those states give up on Western integration, their democratic future could be in jeopardy.

EXPANDING NATO

Having reviewed the reasons for extending Western security to Central and Eastern Europe, there appears to be a legitimate response to the question "*Why expand?*" Given that the justification for security expansion is sufficient, the next question, "*Why expand NATO?*" remains. There are three possible responses: (1) because NATO is the most credible security organization in Europe; (2) because NATO becomes obsolete if it does not expand; and, (3) because NATO is the organization to which the new democracies aspire.

NATO Credibility

While other organizations may play a role, "only NATO," according to the Clinton Administration, has the strength, structure and cooperative spirit, as well as the legitimacy, to meet the challenges of ensuring peace and security in Europe. "History's greatest political-military alliance," NATO's success in sustaining European democracy and stability through the Cold War is touted as qualifying it for the same mission in the post-Cold War period. NATO expansion, the Administration argues, satisfies the security expansion goals of preventing hegemony, promoting regional stability and bolstering democratic reform.²¹

The most compelling argument for NATO expansion is that NATO, as an *alliance* with its U.S. superpower participation, is the only organization capable of opposing the region's worst-case security threat, a resurgent imperialist Russia (the first of the goals credited by the Administration). The Russian threat, however, is the only one that *must* be confronted with U.S. involvement. The remaining objectives for security expansion into the east could be accomplished exclusive of NATO and even without American participation.

There are, in fact, many arguments against using NATO to extend Western security. First,

NATO expansion threatens Russia. Because of its Cold War origins, NATO alone among all of the candidate organizations could be so directly confrontational. NATO is an *alliance* not a *collective security system*, a distinction explained in Dr. Kissinger's passage quoted at the beginning of this essay. It is organized to protect its members against external aggression (and, in this case, originally created specifically to counter Russia's predecessor state) Extending NATO's boundaries eastward undeniably creates new dividing lines in Europe and directly challenges Russia, Administration rhetoric notwithstanding.²²

The oft-repeated warnings of a Russian right-wing backlash to NATO expansion have a basis. No less an authority than George Kennan noted that throughout the Cold War when confronted by American militarism, Moscow's hard-liners gained strength.²³ NATO expansion could prompt a self-fulfilling prophecy of an aggressive non-democratic Russia.²⁴ Manfred Woerner declared that European peace would be "difficult, if not impossible" without Russian participation - confrontation and exclusion are not likely to encourage goodwill or cooperation.²⁵

Another reason not to expand NATO is that the Central and Eastern European states are not ready for NATO membership. At present, their military Command, Control and Communications (C3) systems, weapons, tactics, and organizations are not compatible with those of NATO. Even the most advanced of these states is a long way from meeting NATO military standards.²⁶ Economically, these countries are hard pressed to modernize their militaries and are not capable of meeting the spending levels required by NATO membership; in fact, some cannot even meet their modest Partnership for Peace (PfP) obligations.²⁷ Extending membership to nations that cannot meet membership obligations and therefore do not contribute to the alliance's mutual security would only serve to diffuse its existing power and weaken it overall.

Finally, extending the alliance risks overextending its current members. Expansion carries significant strategic and budgetary implications for the U.S. and its allies. Allied force levels and military expenditures would have to be reassessed at a time when all members are reducing their defense budgets. Furthermore, the alliance could find itself in the position of making security promises it can't keep.²⁸ Expansion threatens to sap NATO's combat power, hobble its decision-making, and expose it to complex conflicts it might not be able to resolve.²⁹ Willy Claes, the new Secretary General of NATO has pointed out that the alliance's credibility is its greatest asset and that a weak NATO could promote instability rather than reducing it.³⁰

NATO Survival

The second justification for choosing NATO as the instrument for extending security guarantees to the east is that such a role will perpetuate the alliance. Many pundits argue that the end of the Cold War has made NATO obsolete. Kissinger, warning of possible organizational atrophy, advocates NATO expansion as the means of restoring its "vitality."³¹ Others agree, declaring that NATO must address current problems or become irrelevant and arguing further that since the new problems are different from those of the Cold War, NATO must adapt.³² Still others, who equate NATO to U.S. influence in Europe, promote NATO expansion as a means for keeping America engaged.³³

These arguments all fall short, principally because they assume that NATO serves no purpose in its present form and circumstance. A contrary view allows NATO to retain its basic role and purpose without aggressive expansion or transformation.

Expansion does not guarantee that NATO will be either preserved or revitalized. As noted before, expansion could overextend the alliance. It could dissipate its strength, complicate its

decision-making and fracture political consensus. Commenting on the internal discord arising over NATO's role in the Balkans, Manfred Woerner warned that "NATO will not survive a second Yugoslavia." Involvement in the potential conflicts of the unstable East does not promise to be easier than Yugoslavia and could well, as Woerner predicted, destroy the alliance.³⁴

The adaptation that accompanies NATO expansion presents another threat: transformation from an *alliance* to a *collective security system*. Dr. Kissinger's distinction between these two types of organizations [see opening quotation] warns of the futility of the latter, yet this is precisely the structure being advocated. In fact, observers note that the transformation is already underway, having begun with the PFP.³⁵ Transforming NATO to meet the near- to mid-term collective security requirements of Central and Eastern Europe threatens the *alliance's* viability and its survival.

The argument that the U.S. lacks influence in the absence of NATO fails on two counts: first in assuming that NATO disappears if it doesn't expand and second, by ignoring America's considerable role in other international spheres. While NATO might wane in the absence of expansion, it is not likely to disappear. Most Europeans, for whom NATO is the embodiment of security, oppose the demise of the alliance and U.S. disengagement.³⁶ Continental insecurity and the associated risks will continue for several years and NATO will therefore remain important to its members because of its mutual security guarantees and because of the continuing U.S. nuclear shield. That shield has additional value in that it promotes nuclear non-proliferation by allowing member states to forego the development of such weapons.

American influence will also remain strong in other areas. Diplomatically, politically and especially economically, the U.S. has, and will continue to have, significant clout. For example, as of 1993, the U.S. had half its foreign investments (\$250 billion) in Europe and generated 40

percent of its total corporate profits there.³⁷

Organization of Choice

The final reason given for expanding NATO is that it is the organization to which these states aspire. This desire stems not only from the alliance's symbolic value, but from a realistic appreciation that the potential commitment of NATO forces in a conflict dramatically increases the possibility of reaching a peaceful resolution.³⁸ This argument, while reasonable, is only valid so long as NATO retains its credibility and capacity to act. If, as argued previously, expansion weakens its capability or reduces its effectiveness in any way, NATO's value to its new members (and its current ones) would be diminished or erased.

ALTERNATIVE TO NATO

Having validated the expanded European security requirement and then determined that NATO is less than ideally suited to meet that requirement because of costs and risks, it's appropriate to offer an alternative. Several options exist. The principal ones are the Organization (formerly, Conference) for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/CSCE), the Western European Union (WEU), and the Partnership for Peace (PfP).

The Russians advocate the OSCE, which they credit with having ended the Cold War.³⁹ OSCE's attraction lies in the fact that it is the only European security organization where Russia is an equal player. By raising the status of the OSCE, Russia hopes to enhance its influence, but that logic is transparent to the other states and only serves to reinforce their desire to link with NATO.⁴⁰

The WEU offers a security option that is also acceptable to Russia.⁴¹ The WEU is the nominal security arm of the European Union (EU) and European pillar of NATO. Nine of the new

states have already become "associate partners" in the organization; however, since membership is confined to EU nations, full integration does not appear to be a short-term possibility.

The Partnership for Peace is the organization that appears to offer the best security potential. Open to all non-NATO members of the Council for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the partnership commits NATO in principle to expansion and provides a mechanism to help partners achieve NATO compatibility in order to facilitate integration. PfP does not provide timelines or a guarantee of NATO integration, emphasizing that expanding alliance membership would be an evolutionary process accomplished within the larger context of the region. The partnership marks a departure from NATO's traditional security alliance function and the beginning of a transformation toward a security system for all Europe.⁴² It separates the *alliance* from the *collective structure*, protecting NATO from the inevitable demise Dr. Kissinger predicted for the latter.

Manfred Woerner noted that PfP put membership where it belonged: "at the end, rather than the beginning of the process of growing closer to NATO." PfP, he observed, would satisfy the region's post-Cold War security needs, while allowing vital Russian involvement.⁴³ Russia has accepted the program, joining 22 other non-NATO nations.

The PfP, if adequately supported and properly handled, could augur Europe's new security architecture. As a collective security system with direct ties to NATO, it offers a comforting association with the security giant without transforming the alliance itself and without weakening it with the burden of unqualified members. Accepted by Russia and endorsed by the other eastern European nations, PfP is the best security solution currently available and it should receive strong, unambiguous American support.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

The expansion of security to the post-communist nations of Europe is crucial to the peace and prosperity of the entire continent. It is also essential to the United States, which has vital interests as well as immutable commitments there and which shares Europe's concerns and risks.

While the the need for an inclusive European security system has been established, NATO's suitability for that role is questionable. The short-term costs and risks inherent in expanding the alliance are not commensurate with the potential gains, particularly when a viable alternative exists. In the present environment, the Partnership for Peace, firmly backed by a strong and credible NATO, is the best means for promoting European stability.

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